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The Gift of the Other: Levinas, Derrida, and a Theology of Hospitality, Andrew Shepherd, with a foreword by Steven Bouma-Prediger, James Clarke, 2014 (ISBN 978-0-227-17484-5), 275 pp., Pb £23 / Ebk £23.40.

Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida are suggestive dialogue partners for theological ethicists. Opening a path beyond text-based and rule-bound approaches, they help us refocus on people. By means of motifs like encounter and welcome, they urge us to be receptive to people in our surrounding world and to connect with them. Sustaining these commitments are the shared Jewish acceptances that God may be known only indirectly, and that purported knowledge of God can never provide grounds for ignoring our communities, especially those members at the margins. Nevertheless, Levinas and Derrida also bring problems. The asymmetrical terms in which Levinas pictures human relationships, with the other approaching me from a position of height and superiority, apparently contradicts the Christian belief that humans have been created equal and should therefore live as equals. In Levinas's later hostage imagery, developed in *Otherwise than Being*, this asymmetry is intensified. Moreover, Derrida's metaphysics of *différance* suggests that every act of hospitality or giving conceals violence and trespass, and that acts and texts remain open to unending deconstructive reinterpretation. It is unclear how a coherent theological ethics could be developed on such shifting sands as these.

In his opening three chapters, Shepherd capably navigates his readers through the thought of Levinas and Derrida, carefully identifying key texts and concepts. In an important fourth chapter, he draws on the relational Trinitarian theology of the Greek Orthodox bishop John Zizioulas to correct their oppositional metaphysics. In the remaining three chapters, which are interspersed with reflections on biblical passages that could usefully be deployed in preaching or pastoral contexts, Shepherd presents a theological ethics grounded in the material previously presented.

In an age when others are either located within totalizing, economically-driven social systems or demonized as terrorists, new ways of speaking about the other, seeing the other and being seen by the other are undoubtedly needed. Refusing both totalization and demonization, Levinas in *Totality and Infinity* sees in the other's face nothing less than an infinity that calls me to an excessive, radical responsibility for them. In the ambitious universality of this vision, however, a concern for particular others is potentially lost. In real life, my proximity to others—family, friends, colleagues—rightly shapes my ethical priorities as a person living in relationship with them. They are not all equally important to me.

Excepting his wife and daughter, most of Levinas's family were killed during the Holocaust. Refounding ethics as first philosophy, he wished for a better world in which others might be

respected simply as others. Derrida, in contrast, was an Algerian Jew who, as such, lived in an ambivalent relation to metropolitan France. From his perspective, the ambiguities of territory and identity cannot be overcome. He is alive to the darker side of hospitality, which can never be comprehended as an 'industry' based on contractual relations between service providers and customers. Via persuasive etymological play, Derrida sees the host (*hostis*) as hostile to the guest's visitation, despite the power (*potis*) that he wields over the guest. This is because hospitality is excessive, ultimately requiring the host to give everything. Meanwhile, with the hoped-for resolution of *différance* never granted, all parties remain unsatisfied. Even a gift cannot be given. For example, by tossing money to a beggar I draw him further into the system of exploitative economic relations that has placed him on the pavement, also making myself feel good and appearing virtuous before others. There is nothing truly praiseworthy about this. From Derrida's viewpoint it would be better to throw him a counterfeit coin.

For Descartes, God's existence was rationally acknowledged by the self and guaranteed the existence of all other people and objects in the world. Levinas and Derrida both refuse any such universal mediation, placing my acknowledgement of the other before ontology. Yet in so doing, both unwittingly perpetuate the isolated Cartesian subject for whom the other is a problem. Introducing into his discussion the Cappadocian notion of being as inherently personal and relational, Shepherd argues that Christian theologians cannot accept this uncritically. Whereas the Latin terminology of substance had ontological content, its Greek rendering as *prosōpon* does not. This suggests that freedom is more about reciprocal relations than about an agonistic striving for recognition excused by ontology. In Zizioulas's famous phrase, being is communion.

In the fifth to seventh chapters, Shepherd develops Christian ethical themes in light of his preceding discussion. God's creation of the world, a gift, is itself an act of hospitality to us human creatures and a source of life to which we must remain connected. Christ is both the hidden host, as at Emmaus, and a homeless guest, on many occasions accepting meals and a bed for the night in other people's houses. Seeing is frequently an important trope in scripture, such as in the narrative of Abraham's near-sacrifice of his son Isaac. In community, the self is constituted by others as well as by the divine Other. Attachment is rightly viewed as an antidote to greed rather than its cause, calling Christians out of the detached living upon which consumer society depends.

Shepherd's exposition and argument have much to commend them. However, there is a danger that too much of what Levinas and Derrida offer is lost if folded into a more palatable Christian schema informed by Orthodox theology. Interpersonal relations may include tension and estrangement, as has long been recognized in Western theological reflection on the configuration of intra-Trinitarian relations when Christ is praying in Gethsemane, on trial, carrying his cross to

Golgotha or being crucified. These are part of church life and ministry too. In any case though, Shepherd's impressive and hospitable theological deployment of Levinas and Derrida and his drawing out of pastoral applications are greatly to be welcomed.

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